



Episode 70 Transcript

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Kelsey Kiel: “Never in a Million Years Would I Have Thought I Could Do This”

Nick Collias: Well, hello there. Welcome to the one and only Bodybuilding.com podcast. We're happy to have your ears for a moment. I am [Nick Collias](#), the host of this podcast. To my right here, we have [Heather Eastman](#), co-host, and over across the table yonder is Kelsey Kiel. She's a CrossFit athlete who's been to the Games both individually and on a team, right?

Kelsey Kiel: Just team.

Nick: Just team, okay.

Kelsey Kiel: Yes.

Nick: Former collegiate soccer player and, as of recently, a new athlete and Team Bodybuilding.com member.

Kelsey Kiel: Woo hoo.

Nick: Kelsey, thank you for coming and talking with us.

Kelsey Kiel: Of course.

Heather Eastman: Welcome.

Nick: Now, you're here shooting all kinds of photos and videos and things like that for Bodybuilding.com, but it's also [Open](#) season.

Kelsey Kiel: It is.

Nick: I want to talk a little bit about that. I know you've had an interesting one so far.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah.

Nick: But also, to start off, I really wanted to ask you about your road to [CrossFit](#) and to lifting as a passion, because you had an athletic background. You lifted but you have not been in CrossFit for a really long time, by any means.

Kelsey Kiel: Not very long. Like you mentioned, I played soccer in college, Division III school in upstate New York, kind of in the middle of nowhere. I would say I was a mediocre soccer player, really enjoyed the college lifestyle.

Nick: Oh, okay.

Kelsey Kiel: All that that entails.

Nick: One of those kinds of soccer players.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah, yeah. It was Division III. It wasn't like our life, like Division I.

Heather: Is there any other kind?

Kelsey Kiel: True. All soccer players. Then when I graduated, I moved back to the Philadelphia area and I was coaching soccer. I had a team of eight-year-old girls. It was so fun, their parents not so much, but the girls were great. I was an assistant coach at [Rosemont College](#) in Philly, tons of fun, was playing on some pickup soccer leagues and I actually ended up breaking my ankle in a co-ed league and that was the first time I'd ever been actually crutch sidelined.

Nick: Really? You've never had like the [ACL](#) like so many women do?

Kelsey Kiel: Never, actually.

Heather: Wow.

Kelsey Kiel: Surprisingly-

Nick: You'd inflicted that on somebody else, I'm assuming at that point.

Heather: She went straight to the ankle.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah, once or twice, no. But that was that like totally sidelined me, obviously. I was on crutches, then embraced the college, after college lifestyle.

Nick: College after college lifestyle.

Kelsey Kiel: A little bit.

Nick: That forced inactivity, that's what ...

Kelsey Kiel: Exactly.

Nick: For athletes, that's what gets you.

Kelsey Kiel: If someone had a crystal ball and they told me back then that this is where I'd be at this very moment in my life, I would have laughed. Fitness and CrossFit was never on my radar, nutrition, none of it. Soccer, obviously, you had to be relatively fit and all that, but never was ... I was 25 minutes on the elliptical, things like that, not that that's bad or anything like that, but eating well and that kind of thing was nowhere on my radar.

Nick: Soccer is one of those sports where it's just intense enough that it can kind of be your everything.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. I deadlifted and squatted in the weight room, but never did any-

Nick: Never passionately.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah. I loved the off-season weight training, but we never had a detailed program for it or anything like that, so again, it was so never on my radar like that. Then I broke my ankle and my sister actually is in the Navy. She was stationed overseas in Africa and she said that all they did really was go to work and then they would go to CrossFit. They would do CrossFit. She came back from being stationed overseas and it was right as I was able to be active again and she had been gone for a whole year and we were trying to spend as much time together as we could and she's like, "I want to go to a CrossFit class. Come with me." "I don't want to go to this ..." I made fun of CrossFitters.

Nick: Oh, really?

Kelsey Kiel: Oh, yeah.

Nick: What did that kind of athlete represent to you at that point?

Kelsey Kiel: At that point, one of my high school friends did it and she loved it and I don't know. I was always like, "I don't need to do that." I don't know. It was always just obsessive. I was just like, "CrossFitters are weird." Which we are. But it was like, "Okay, Terry, I'll go with you." She took me to my first class and I was so freaking bad at it, like awful that I was like-

Nick: Do you remember what you did?

Kelsey Kiel: We did [Helen](#).

Heather: Helen.

Nick: Oh, okay.

Kelsey Kiel: Helen, I think, yeah. It was- Look at you, that was way back. Pull-ups, kettlebell swings and running. It was just ... I mean-

Nick: Okay, so taxing on the engine.

Heather: It's one of their infamous inversion where it's like 21 kettlebell swings and 12 pull-ups just because.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah.

Heather: Just because why not just switch the numbers?

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah. It was bad. I was so bad. That's when the competitive part of me that had kind of sat the bench for a little bit was like, "Okay, we need to figure this out and let's do another class."

Nick: Okay, so there's two ways you can do there. You can run, screaming from it or you can say, "I'm so bad at this, I need to do it again."

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah. That was in 2014. I think it was like the December of 2014, maybe or 2013 and then 2014.

Nick: Okay, it's about five years ago.

Heather: Yeah.

Kelsey Kiel: January 2014, I signed up for that Open that year after having done maybe three weeks of CrossFit. It was laughable.

Heather: Because why not? Yeah.

Kelsey Kiel: There were chest-to-bar pull-ups and I was like jumping to maybe try to get ... It was just like no way. I just kind of dove in. I was living at home and was working random jobs to figure out what I wanted to do, so I couldn't really afford a full membership at a CrossFit gym, which is something that people talk about a lot.

Nick: Oh, yeah. That's a common situation.

Kelsey Kiel: Common, so it was actually a gentleman that went to my high school, he was in two grades above me, that opened this gym from a small town. I asked if I could clean the floors. I cleaned of floors and figured out a little trade with him and that kind of thing. I was just going three times a week, was never thinking ... I have a video of me, however long ago, it was like a deadlift PR of 200 pounds. Thinking back, that was a big deal.

Nick: You were posting, you were sharing. You were-

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah, a little bit.

Nick: You were really tracking your progress then at that point.

Kelsey Kiel: Then I moved out of my parents' house. I moved into the city of Philadelphia and then it was like, "Okay, now I'm paying rent and I don't have that magical fridge that just restocks itself," so I had to stop paying membership... CrossFitting, really. I lived in Philadelphia for a few months and I was like, "I need to go back." I missed it that much. I was just kind of like going on runs and that kind of thing. I missed the CrossFit space.

Nick: When you say the space, the box itself has a special feeling in there.

Kelsey Kiel: 100%.

Nick: It's the ultimate adult playground.

Kelsey Kiel: That's what I say.

Nick: Whether you do CrossFit or not.

Kelsey Kiel: Exactly. That's what I say to my on-ramps at the gym that I coach at now is I'm like, "This is this weird adult ..." We have ropes and monkey bars kind of and it's just this place that you can ... I don't know. It's just the coolest space, I think.

Heather: You have really interesting perspective starting where you did and where you're at now. You have a quote in there where you talk about everyone has to start somewhere. You started where you started.

Kelsey Kiel: I started with two green, thick bands on pull-ups. That's what I think that a lot people look at me now and they're like, "You've always been like that."

Nick: Right.

Kelsey Kiel: It did maybe happen for me a little bit faster than it did for some people. But I think that's because of who I was surrounding myself with. I was just doing a three-times-a-week membership and I was just cleaning floors in exchange for membership and coaching the boot camps so that I could go to these classes. It was the Open of 2015, [Dave Castro](#) programmed a whole nine minutes of you have to be able to CrossFit, breathe heavy, move, cycle a light barbell, toes to bar, gymnastics, that kind of thing. Then it was six minutes to find a 1-rep max clean and jerk, so it was the CrossFit coupled with a strength piece.

On the CrossFit side, I don't remember what I got in the region, maybe like 800th or something, not good. Then I got 2nd in my region for weight on the clean and jerk. I was like, "Okay." That was kind of like a mental turning point for me where I said to myself if I could figure out the other stuff I know I'm strong enough. If I just maintain and improve on my strength and I figure out that other piece or many pieces to the sport then maybe I can be okay at it. Again, if you had told me at that point that I would be where I am now, I still wouldn't have believed you.

Nick: Yeah, you're talking about, like, "Maybe I could be okay at it."

Kelsey Kiel: Maybe I could-

Nick: In my community.

Kelsey Kiel: In a local competition.

Nick: Right.

Kelsey Kiel: Or something like that.

Nick: Not "it's something I could devote my entire livelihood to" or anything like that.

Kelsey Kiel: [CrossFit Games](#). Yeah.

Nick: What opened your eyes to that next level of potential like, "You know what? Maybe I can actually really be out there doing this."

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah, so like I said, it happened pretty quickly for me. That was the Open of 2015, and a whole mess of things happened. I actually hurt my back in a local competition. I had to stop pulling from the ground. I had to do everything strict. I couldn't even swing in a kip, my back was so messed up. I was seeing a PT in New Jersey right over the bridge from Philadelphia and there was a gym that I kind of knew who the owner was. He didn't know who I was or anything like that, but I had seen him at that competition that I had actually had hurt my back at.

He had an athlete there and he ... I didn't have a coach at my ... One of my best friends was there cheering me on at this competition and I remember I was on the rower and I was just dead. It was the second round and you had to get as far as you could and I was just ... My pull was just miserable, not good form, anything. I heard this deep voice and he was like, "You better pull, girl." I'm like, "I don't know who this stranger is, but ..."

Nick: Jesus, is that you?

Kelsey Kiel: He's telling me to pull.

Heather: Voice from above.

Kelsey Kiel: So, I pulled, and he remembers that now that we have talked about it, but I remembered that I saw him coaching his athletes there. That's why I investigated his gym a little bit. It happened to be near where I was getting PT on my back. Long story short, I ended up switching gyms, because he had a few more competitive athletes, in my mind, competitive athletes, local competition competitive athletes that I wanted to work out with.

So, I switched gyms and then that opened up another door to someone who is now one of my best friends in the entire world. She owns [CrossFit Parallax](#) in Clermont, New Jersey. Somehow, I got connected because my old coach, Ryan knew a guy who trained with Rachel and the guy knew I was down in Ocean City and said, "Come train with us." I trained with them one day.

Nick: Right. Just the community lifting you up there.

Kelsey Kiel: Exactly. Rachel, individual regional athlete, D1 gymnast, phenomenal athlete. I remember training next to her like, "Oh, my gosh. You're really good." Then again that's where it kind of just kept going and kept going, because sooner or later, more phenomenal athletes started going to Rachel's gym and then the Open comes around and then it was you had to train with a team if you wanted to go to regionals on a team. You had to do a majority of your training sessions at the gym with that team or at the gym, really.

We kind of had a sit down. It was when it was teams of six and Rachel said, "Do you want to try this

team thing?" Me, never have been to regionals, I'm like, "Sure! Let's do it. Let's try to qualify for regionals." I said that. I was like, "Yeah, regionals. Yeah, we got this." My other best friend, Kelly, "Yeah, regionals," never been to regionals herself. Rachel and two of the three guys had been to regionals and I remember Rachel sitting there and being like, "No, we're gonna go to regionals." I was like, "What?"

She looked at me and she's like, "The goal is Carson," which was the CrossFit Games. At that point, I'm like, "You're funny, but okay." Again, it was just who I was around that I had to step up my game. That's where it had to switch.

We qualified for regionals and we missed winning our regional by four points, but we got second and qualified for the CrossFit Games, just absolute insanity. It was a wild ride of eight months, but it was like that was kind of ...

Nick: Had anybody on your team been to the Games at that point?

Kelsey Kiel: Nope.

Nick: Okay, because that's another thing that sometimes people go to the Games and they come back and they say, "I'm coming back," and sometimes they say, "I'm never doing that again in my entire life."

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah, so again, three of the six of them had been to regionals, so we had three rookies on the team and then all of us were rookies for the CrossFit Games, so we didn't know what we were doing.

Nick: Right.

Kelsey Kiel: But training together and again, kind of forcing ... I say this to them now, but they forced me to be a better athlete. I didn't want to let them down, played team sports, obviously. It was just like I had no other choice.

Nick: I assume when you say they forced you to be a better athlete, it doesn't just mean what's happening in the gym at that point, right?

Kelsey Kiel: Oh, yeah.

Nick: At this point, I'm imagining that the rigors of competitive CrossFit forced you to get all of the behaviors in your life just dialed in. What was that experience like?

Kelsey Kiel: Absolutely. Yeah, so that's actually a couple steps back during that ... when I hurt my back in early 2015. I had hired a nutrition coach, actually right when I hurt my back, because I was like, "Okay, I'm injured," because I went through the ankle thing. I saw 210 pounds on the scale. I remember it vividly because of that clean and jerk in the open. In my head, I'm like, "Well, what if two people tie? Are they going to make us weigh in?" Then I was like, "My weight right now is not the weight on my games profile." I remember stressing about that and it was because I was more, I weighed more.

I was also eating whatever I wanted and going out and partying and that kind of thing. Then I started to do ... count macros on my own. I bought a book and I read the book and I tried to do it on my own and I think I lost probably like eight to ten pounds, which is probably just me not eating [Chick-fil-A](#) and drinking every night.

Nick: Those two will... they'll do something.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah, that'll do a little bit.

Heather: For sure.

Kelsey Kiel: But then I got injured and I... So, I actually invested and I hired a nutrition coach, who has now completely changed my life. She helped me really dial it in, and that's... I mean I went from 200 pounds and then during that 2016 Open I was 162? Which was actually... looking back was a little bit too light for my size, and my activity level, and that kind of thing. Now I'm at a much better spot, but it's kind of like that.

Nick: Sure, sure. And how different was the experience of really having that competitive guidance for nutrition. Just in terms of the day-to-day like, "Oh, wow, I feel different I'm performing differently." Or just how I'm eating, how different was that?

Kelsey Kiel: It was... Well, like I mentioned, it was a big change, I did get a little bit obsessive with it at first like, "Okay, I need to eat two almonds to hit my fat today." Little things like that where it was like, "Okay, Kelsey, chill out." But it worked. I have always been a larger female and going down... hitting 165 I was like, "Wow, I never thought I'd see that number on the scale." And then looking back now because where I am and the amount that I eat now, looking back at my 162 it was like, "Oh, no wonder my back hurt. No wonder..." like little things, I was lacking some energy, but I was also like, "I need to..." I was training so much more than I ever had been and... for a while, it was like, "Let's just get my weight to a good spot and then figure it out."

Heather: Well you had an interesting post a few weeks ago on Instagram where you talked about in gymnastics you always think that if you go lower in body weight it's going to make your lifts better, because the theory is you're lifting less weight because you're lifting your body weight. And you actually talked about how you have found that to not be the case, that you are able to do more muscle-ups and more chest-to-bar pull-ups at 15 to 20 pounds heavier than you were. So, what was kind of that process of discovery like? Because... going from being afraid of the number on the scale or kind of fighting the number on the scale to accepting and even turning into the fact that gaining weight can help you.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah. Right, I mean that was always my thing. I remember doing one of those [InBody](#) scans during the Open in 2016 and it showed eight percent body fat, and I don't know how accurate those things are, they're usually a percentage or two off. But still eight to ten percent for what I was doing, my activity level, the compounding I was putting the stress on my body.

Nick: For a woman, that's low.

Heather: You're below essential fat at that point.

Kelsey Kiel: Super low, right-

Heather: 11 to 13 percent is essential.

Kelsey Kiel: ...and again no wonder my back hurt, no wonder things were hurting. But I also... going off of the weight 165 pounds is still a relatively heavy female, but like all the things tie together. I always said, "I've got to be lighter for gymnastics." I don't know how many times I said that, because gymnastics, again back to that lifting and gymnastics piece, was always my weakness, was that

gymnastics. So, I just always thought... and that's kind of the distorted brain anyway. Obsessive female over here, thinking I need to be as light as possible. And it's only been more recently that, and why I posted that, because I work with nutrition clients now as a coach, and I hear that often. And again, if you're 210 pounds like I was, stringing toes-to-bar together is going to be hard, or getting that first pull-up, or whatever it might be.

But if you're at a healthy weight, I implore people to look at what kind of... your strength, if you're at a good weight, and your energy is good, and you're moving the barbell well, and your conditioning is good, then why not just get stronger to be able to pull yourself up more. Or things like that. I don't know-

Nick: It's hard though, it's hard. I mean those ideas of leanness and body composition-

Kelsey Kiel: Oh, I could talk forever.

Nick: ...they're so much bigger than just what you're doing in the gym, its stuff that goes back to your childhood for... I mean we have a vision of ourselves and what our capabilities are. Goes way, way back. And CrossFit from the outside you would think yeah it would be immune to that because it's what you can do, right? It's a sport based on what you can do, not what you look like, not what the InBody says. It's strange for me to hear you even say that you got on the in-body at the Games. "What are you doing getting on the InBody? Think about the Games, man!"

Kelsey Kiel: Right, yeah. So that's actually... I mean that's a hurdle for everyone one, I hear it all the time. I mean even just shooting this morning I was like, "Okay, I haven't been working out." I'm like, "Kelsey, stop, you're fine." It's just like you said it can be so deeply rooted in people to just constantly compare and you see someone with chiseled abs on Instagram and you're going to compare yourself. No matter who you are I think.

Heather: Yeah, I mean I have so many people say, "Oh, I want that CrossFitter body." And I kind of point out, "Well, it's not an aesthetic sport, they get that body as an after-effect of what their body is able to do." It's very, very much performance based, to Nick's point.

Kelsey Kiel: People ask me a lot like, "What are your ab exercises?" I don't do crunches, I don't... I think, I mean a big part of how I look is just a result of what I do every day. More in the past couple months, I've done more isolation bodybuilding, functional bodybuilding-type deal. But that's because I want to get better at my strict pulling, and my pushing, and I want to be able to flip upside down and do 20 strict handstand push-ups unbroken. But that's... I'm not going to be able to do that if I don't work on my strict pressing and my pulling. I think people have a misconception that you need to flip upside down and do those things to get better at those things. Where it's like you can do a seated dumbbell strict press and keep your core tight, keep your legs together, and keep good overhead position, and you're going to get stronger to be able to then flip upside down.

Heather: Well that's interesting because one of the questions I wanted to ask you is do you... you're now a Bodybuilding.com athlete... which bodybuilding and CrossFit have always kind of had an unspoken rivalry, or maybe spoken rivalry.

Nick: It's spoken in the [YouTube](#) comments, I think.

Heather: And you go to bodybuilding shows and everyone onstage is like, "So-and-so works out at Crossfit blah blah blah." They're all... a lot of them are working out in a CrossFit gym, but then they're also competing so we've seen a lot of crossover that way. But now, if I'm hearing you correctly, they're may be room for a CrossFitter to take... kind of to cross over a little bit into the

bodybuilding world in terms of isolation exercises. So, what's your take on that? Where can that really help someone at your level, or maybe someone who wants to get to the Games, or wants even just get to regionals.

Nick: Get stronger or... yeah.

Kelsey Kiel: I think that's a really good question because... or realization I think. Like you said, Crossfit bodies are a result of what we do, but I think... I mean I'm also... I don't read YouTube comments, I don't know. I do know that people... But I think... I'll just give an example, in the gym that I coach at, we don't do handstands. Handstand push-ups aren't programmed for the masses, because not many people in our gym can do a handstand push-up. If we have a dumbbell... seated dumbbell strict press programmed, if you can do five strict handstand push-ups then we can scale you up. We can figure that out.

I think that CrossFit gets a bad rep because people tend to just program just CrossFit. They'll program rope climbs or ring muscle-ups, things that... people will just stare at the rope and not get a work out in, whereas I have all the respect for bodybuilders or powerlifters. People that are in the gym and doing the little things, like we talked about the isolation movements, and things that will just get you stronger. And that kind of goes back to my post, if you're not focusing on those little things, like swinging and flailing on the rings trying to get a muscle-up isn't going to help you if you're not strong enough to do the movement itself, strict.

Nick: And it can definitely hurt you.

Kelsey Kiel: Hurt you, right. Which is a whole other side of CrossFit, you know.

Heather: Another little area.

Nick: So, I wonder how your relationship with muscle itself has changed over time too, because when we were talking about body composition issues or the problems that people have with their own bodies usually that means, "I have a problem with body fat." It's not with muscle. But as you get into CrossFit, CrossFit it's a sport where muscle is totally on display, it's a sport where muscle is kind of unapologetically there, and it's really redefining the amount of muscle that a woman can carry and be... just what an athletic woman can look like. So, how has your relationship with muscle changed overtime, from when you were a soccer player?

Kelsey Kiel: That's... Drastically changed. Soccer was the biggest part of my life for so long, and if you look at a soccer player's body... typically when I say I played soccer people are like, "Oh, you're a center back, you're like the big girl in the back that people didn't want to mess with."

Nick: The enforcer.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah, soccer players tended to be taller, thinner, girls, and I was surrounded by that. And I think that that's a big part of where my personal body issue stuff came from. And not that it was any of my best friend's faults, but the constantly comparing to my best friend, who was a center mid-fielder who could run miles, and miles and miles, but that was never me. And then coming into a sport where I had people, I have people, like [Kara Webb](#), to look up to who talks about her legs all the time. I've always had big legs since I was a baby, they've just been large forever.

Nick: Since I was a baby!

Kelsey Kiel: My mom has this picture of me, I'm on this dock at my uncle's lake house and she must have been calling my name, and I'm turning and my leg is huge compared to my body. I've literally had huge legs my whole life. Which was great when I could shoot a soccer ball 45 yards out and score, but it was always that battle in high school and college. And then in this CrossFit world, like you said, its unapologetically on display. Not only are female's bodies doing these amazing things, but people appreciate that. And it's like... I don't even think about... I don't even worry about the fact that my thighs touch, no matter what.

Heather: It's not-

Kelsey Kiel: That used to be a thing that wanting my legs to not touch for once, now I'm like, "Yeah, these things-"

Heather: They can do stuff.

Kelsey Kiel: The things my body can do now and that I can appreciate my body doing. Things that I never in a million years would have thought that I could have done.

Nick: So, between that first time when you went into the box and did Helen and now though, did you... was there a hard conversation there? Or every time you look in the mirror maybe there's something new you go, "Oh, yeah!"

Kelsey Kiel: Well I was pretty over weight in that first part, and I knew that I had a pretty unhealthy relationship with myself, with food, with partying and going out. I kind of on this bad spiral. I come from a very obsessive-compulsive family, which with whatever route that is, and I think that it could have been a drinking route or a way over-eating route. I still really love to eat. By the way, I eat a lot of food.

Nick: There's nothing wrong with that.

Kelsey Kiel: But I think in that way the sport has completely saved my life. Because I not only will say, "Oh, I'm going to stop drinking and see what happens." And weight was coming off me, and I was feeling good, and I was waking up rested, all these things. That then I was able to be my obsessive-compulsive self and do something that was healthy. Granted, too much obsession over nutrition or something like that can eventually get unhealthy, but I think that it saved my life in a way that I... it was not an overnight thing where I was looking in the mirror and saying, "Yeah, girl!" But it got to that point.

Heather: Yeah you mentioned, "I knew I'd let myself go, not just with how I looked, but how I felt." And having trained clients they'll come in all the time, "I want to look better, I want look better, I want to look better." But they really don't make a change until they want to feel better.

Kelsey Kiel: Exactly.

Heather: And that kind of leads me into my next question, which is about mindset. Now in my mind there's two different kinds of CrossFit athletes, there's those that are physically strong and those that are mentally strong. And I'll bet... I know how I feel about it, but I'm kind of curious, in your opinion which one is going to kind of win out at the end?

Kelsey Kiel: Its funny I was just thinking about this a little bit. Your... [Soccer](#), you go and you practice soccer. You have to practice kicking the soccer ball in such a way that your muscles then

remember how to do that. Same thing with CrossFit. You watch someone try to do a snatch for the first time and you're like, "Okay, we need to not ever do that again." But if you practice it they're going to get better at it, right? Muscle memory.

The same exact thing with your brain. If you over, and over, and over tell yourself, "You're a screw-up." And you can't do something, you won't be able to do it. Maybe physically but because you are telling yourself you can't you're not going to do it. I think that the brain is just like any other muscle and you have to train it in such a way that you're going to then be able to physically do... So, to answer your question, a physically strong person might succeed to a point, right? Their abilities might take them so far, but if you are not mentally practicing what you need to practice, and training your brain, too, you're not going to... I mean in any kind of competition setting I think, not just CrossFit.

Heather: It sounds like you're saying that you could start out as just a physically strong athlete, but through training your brain, you can actually become mentally strong as well as physically strong.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah.

Heather: Just like, you could start out mentally strong, you know.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah. I think that, the mental side of it is just as big, if not bigger, you know.

Heather: So, how does one go about training their [mental toughness](#)?

Kelsey Kiel: Oh, boy. That's a topic!

Heather: Well, how did it start for you? How did you do...

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah.

Heather: ... I mean, it sounds like you were kind of a natural-born athlete. You were a competitive soccer player in college.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah.

Heather: And so, you, you know, you quickly found that CrossFit kind of fed that...

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah, the competitive.

Heather: ... urge, that competitive side of you.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah.

Heather: And so, but, was there a point? Because, you mentioned in several interviews, you know; I break down just like everybody else.

Kelsey Kiel: Absolutely.

Heather: I go cry in the bathroom, and then come back and get it done. So...

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah.

Heather: ... was there a point when you said, "Okay, I really need to start dialing in my mental gain as well as my physical gain?"

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah.

Heather: And, what did that look like?

Kelsey Kiel: So, I talked about 2016 and that craziness. I don't think I was even... like, the mental toughness wasn't even on my radar, because it all happened so fast, and I was with these athletes that I knew. Like, it was just like I was playing soccer again. Like, I had to be good for my teammates, kind of thing. I moved to Reno, Nevada in 20... after the 2016 Games, and I started training as an individual, and it was a whole different beast.

It was like, okay, now I'm by myself, and I have to do a workout. I'm not racing my teammate. This time, I... this is like, time to figure it out. And, the coach that I was working with, my first coach at the time, I would send him footage of my lifts and my workouts, and that kind of thing. And, I was super bummed one day about some workout. And, he watched the footage back, and he, like, took a few screenshots.

And, it was me in the gym. And, I, before I went to pick up the barbell, or before I went to do a movement, I don't even remember the workout. But, I was looking around. And, I was, not just kind of like glancing here like, where's the chalk, kind of thing. It was like I was looking to see who was looking. I was looking at the clock, and I was very not focused. And, he's like, we need to figure out what's going on here. And, I was like, yep. Not focused. It was very clear watching it back. And, I, like, went out, bought a bunch of books, Amazon Prime. And, I just started reading books, because I didn't even know what training my mind was going to look like.

Heather: Any favorites that come to mind?

Kelsey Kiel: "[The Art of Mental Training](#)." That was the first one I got. That was a recommendation, and I've gone back to that one a bunch. It's short and sweet. And, I started listening to Justin S'ua's podcasts. He has a podcast, it's like, five minutes long, max.

Nick: Not like this one.

Heather: A little shorter!

Kelsey Kiel: But, it's like the perfect way to start my day, kind of thing. It's called, "[Increase Your Impact](#)," and it's just like, he gives you little gold nuggets every day. I'm like, "Yes! Yep! Awesome!" And, he's been like a small, but also very large part of my mental stuff, as well. I think he's brilliant. He works with some pretty cool people.

Nick: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kelsey Kiel: So, it definitely started changing in 20... the training for the 2017 Open and regionals.

Heather: So, that just became kind of part of your practice and very much...

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah.

Heather: ... something you just had to figure out as you went?

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah. I think that, just like any kind of training, like it, like ebbed and flowed. With the 2017 season, I... my goal was to qualify for regionals. That was, as an individual, because it was my first shot at individual. I just wanted to make it and see, like, what happened. And, I made it. I was actually 22nd. They take top 20, but enough girls went team that, I got my 2nd round invite.

And then, they released the workouts for regionals, and there was Dave Castro didn't program one workout that had a barbell, and that was my thing, barbell. I'm like, "If they put that old regional workout in, I got it. If they put a max lift, I'm winning that." Like, I was so confident about the barbell. Obviously, we talked about another part. And, he didn't put one barbell in the entire three days of workouts.

And, that was another mental, like, "Okay! Sick!" Like, finally made it to Regionals as an individual, and I don't get my cup of tea. But, that was also, like, something I just had to work through. I gave myself a day that, he released the workouts. I went, and I practiced one of the workouts, and I didn't finish it, and I walked away, and I was crying. And, I was like; I get it one day. I wallowed, gave myself a little pity party, like; He didn't program the barbell!

And then, the next day, I was like; Okay. We got to just train your ass off. And, I went, and my goal is to have fun. My goal is to not get last, and I didn't get last. I did much better than I anticipated. So, that was another, like, kind of like, jump in all of that mental stuff. But, yeah.

Nick: So, what's next for you competitively? And I mean, you know, CrossFit is at this interesting juncture right now where kind of like bodybuilding was a few years. You don't have to be a regular competitor in order to have a living, have a passion for it. Like, what's... how much competition is still in your future?

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah, that's a really good question. Had you asked me that, however many months ago before they made the big changes to CrossFit, I would tell you that, you know, I want to go team another year or two. And then, I want to qualify as an individual. That's kind of my big dream/goal. Now, with the changes, and all of these crazy changes that some of them I don't even know what's going on, it's a little different. It's kind of morphed a little bit more into a professional sport. They've gotten rid of regionals. Now, they have these sanctionals, these sanctioned events. We have the Open that's happening right now. We also have, apparently another Open in October.

Nick: I don't think I heard about that one.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah. I guess there's two Opens this year. Again, I don't know all the things that are happening. But, as a team athlete, it's a little bit different. We teams, nothing can happen for us out of the Open. As a team of four, you have to win a sanctioned event. You need to get first out at a sanctioned event in order to qualify for the CrossFit Games. So again, it's turned into a little bit more of that professional sport-esque, because you don't have to train at the same gym anymore. You can put a super team together and head off to Brazil, and go try to win the sanctioned event, which is cool, and it's not cool. And, it's...

Nick: Right. I could see... yeah. I can see pluses and minuses.

Kelsey Kiel: Exactly. For us...

Heather: I could see how this would definitely shake up the community.

Kelsey Kiel: It shakes it up, exactly. Invictus Boston, [Team Invictus Boston](#) really prided ourselves on our team chemistry. That worm work, we're really, we're pretty solid at when, you know, because we're practicing together all the time. Now, it's a little bit different. You're seeing four individual games athletes come together on teams to create these super teams. So, to answer your question, what's next for me on the horizon is my team. We qualified. We did an online qualifier. So, we qualified for the [Reykjavik Championship](#). That's in May, which is a sanctioned event. So, our goal is to get there and win that event so we can make it to the CrossFit Games.

Nick: Okay.

Heather: Cool.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah.

Nick: And, whatever you do in the future, do you feel like you want to do it team, rather than individual? Did you get the individual out of your ... ?

Kelsey Kiel: That was... yeah. So, that was another kind of, like, mental thing that I went through when they were announcing all these changes. A lot of stuff was going on in my life, like, huge, just ups and downs of life. And, I was like; Maybe this is, you know, I'm 27. Maybe I'm done here. And then, like, again, more things happened, and I was like; No, I'm still in this, and I'm still going to, you know, work really hard. And... but, thinking about team versus individual, I think I'm on the team side.

Nick: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kelsey Kiel: Not that it would be cool to get top 20 in the world, and get my invite that way through the Open, or that kind of thing. But, I really miss that team thing. The Open, obviously, is very individual-based that, I'm like; Let's get together, all four of us so we can do some team stuff. So, I think I'm on that Team track.

Nick: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. I think that there's something to be said for that too, especially, I mean, you've been to war with it with a couple of teams now.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah.

Nick: I imagine that the Games could be a pretty lonely place for an individual.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah.

Nick: You know.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah, definitely a different thing. Yeah. I was... lonely is an interesting word, because, looking back on when I went to just regionals as an Individual, people had headphones in, and not really talking... a few people talking to one another. But then, you go back, like, in the warm-up areas, the teams, everyone's like chatting and that kind of thing. Not that, like, you're not focused and ...

Nick: There's shouting, and I'm sure there's also all that other stuff.

Kelsey Kiel: Absolutely.

Nick: That's part of it.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah.

Heather: For someone coming from the team background...

Kelsey Kiel: Yes.

Heather: ... it seems odd to me that you'd want to go the individual route.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah.

Heather: Because, team seems like such a natural fit for you. I mean, that's what's kind of been lifting you up.

Kelsey Kiel: Right. And I think that's what I've realized recently, is that, like, I... the whole thing with the Open right now is a little side story. But, it's cool to be able to see how... where I stack up right now with this, with the Open, and the individual fitness, like; How fit are you in the world? Or, whatever it is. But, like, in the last 24 hours, realizing, like, that means nothing, really, when, like, I am... I want to be better so that I can help my team out. And, that's like, that's where I, like, really draw from is kind of that, like, true north, like, that's my thing.

Nick: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So, now, I did read... I did see one post on [your Instagram](#), and you mentioned you had a, kind of a mishap in the Open this year.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah. That happened last night.

Nick: Do you think, maybe a bit of a Freudian slip there? Like ...

Kelsey Kiel: Weird!

Nick: ... committing you to the team path? Tell us what happened.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah. So, you have to submit your score for each week for the Open by Monday night. And, in my head, I'm like; East Coast time, 8:00 p.m. Then, I was like; Wait! Am I an hour behind? Obviously, time traveling is hard! Yeah, I just, I missed the cutoff to submit my score. I was like eight minutes late or something like that. And, I looked at my phone like... and emailed CrossFit HQ, but, their hands are tied, like, this is totally just on me.

So, I missed my cutoff time to submit it, and so, I'm not on the Leaderboard. Or, I'm maybe on the Leaderboard, with a zero, or a gajillion points. I don't how that works, I always forget. So, it won't be a true test. And, I think it's... I was talking with a few people, [Alyssa Ritchey](#), I was talking a little bit with her. And she was like; Why are you so bummed out about this? Like, again, last night, I was giving myself some time to give myself a little pity party. Because, I was like; I finally feel like I can hang with the big dogs a little bit. My 19.1 score was 16th in the world, like, I'm so interested to see where I-

Nick: See, and that's not a barbell, and that's not one that place your strengths.

Kelsey Kiel: Right.

Nick: It's a burner.

Kelsey Kiel: Well, bars and rowing are wheelhouse for me.

Nick: Right.

Kelsey Kiel: But, I don't know. It was like, I've really finally, finally in my brain, felt like I could hang with these female CrossFit athletes that I've looked up to for so long. Like, seeing my name next to some of these females that I'm like, just sometimes still comparing myself to, and not maybe, not being as confident in my own abilities. Seeing my name up there was pretty cool. And, she's like; Yes, your big victory is making it back with your team, and you're still working on being the best athlete you can be for your team. So, it's like, it happened. I can be mad at myself, or I can let it go and move on to the next thing.

Nick: All right. Well, we're happy to have you on our team.

Heather: Yes, definitely, Team Bodybuilding.com.

Kelsey Kiel: It's been the best 36 hours, 48 hours, so far.

Nick: It's been wonderful.

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah.

Nick: Kelsey Kiel, thank you so much for talking with us.

Kelsey Kiel: Of course.

Nick: If somebody wants to follow you, how do they do it?

Kelsey Kiel: Yes. My Instagram. It's [@KelsKiel](#).

Nick: Kels?

Kelsey Kiel: Yeah, Kels.

Heather: And, if they want to follow Oliver?

Kelsey Kiel: [Oliver squish face](#). (Oliver, underscore, squish, underscore, face.)

Heather: That's her little French Bulldog. He's adorable.

Nick: I think I saw him. He has his own feed as well.

Kelsey Kiel: Oh, yes. He does.

Heather Eastman: All right.

Kelsey Kiel: Thanks guys.

Nick Collias: All right. Thank you so much.

Kelsey Kiel: Of course.



[BODYBUILDING.COM'S GUIDE TO THE CROSSFIT GAMES](#)

The 2019 CrossFit Games are days away, so we're spotlighting this sport and celebrating our Team Bodybuilding.com Games athletes: Kelsey Kiel and Saxon Panchik!